

Amr Mohamed Riched and Nicholas Duy Nguyen (editors)

*The Black Question in America and the Pan-African Movement:
An Interview with Trinidadian Intellectual C. L. R. James (1901-1989)*

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Project: African American Collection.
O.H. 1690.

Oral Interview with C. L. R. James, conducted by Joan V. Feeney,
August 4, 1976, Washington, DC.

Introduction

The oral history interview transcribed below belongs to a collection held in CSUF's Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), titled "African American Collection." The interview with C. L. R. James was conducted by Joan V. Feeney, on August 4, 1976, in Washington, DC. The interview lasted 1 hour, 1 minute, and 19 seconds, and is archived as a digital recording/audio file at COPH (see "Copyright Advisory" below). The verbatim transcript edited here was prepared in 2019 by Amr Mohamed Riched and Nicholas Duy Nguyen.

C. L. R. (Cyril Lionel Robert) James was born on January 4, 1901, in Tunapuna, Trinidad and Tobago, and he died on May 31, 1989, in London. He was an eminent cultural critic, a socialist activist, a journalist, an avid cricketer, and a Pan-Africanist. In his early years, he taught History and English. He moved to London in 1933 and to the U.S. in 1938. He was expelled from the U.S. in 1952/1953 during the McCarthy era but allowed to return in 1970 when he received an appointment at Federal City College in Washington, DC. His publications (mentioned in this interview) include *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938); *A History of Negro Revolt* (1938), republished as *A History of Pan-African Revolt* (1969); and his memoir, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963).

Over the course of his career (and discussed in the interview) James interacted with Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, Trinidadian Civil Rights activist Stokely Carmichael, Ghanaian politician Kwame Nkrumah, communist activist George Breitman, African American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, Trinidadian journalist George Padmore, African American author Richard Wright, Marxist author Martin Glaberman, American activist Grace (Chin) Lee Boggs, French anarchist writer Daniel Guérin, African American author LeRoi Jones Amiri Baraka, and others. James was impressed by the Montgomery bus boycott, by African American Civil Rights activist Malcolm X, and by Bermudan Civil Rights activist Roosevelt Brown/Pauulu Kamarakafego. James helped facilitate a 1941 sharecroppers' strike in southeast Missouri, and he took a leading role in a number of socialist groups and publication efforts. C. L. R. James's story reveals the varied

experiences of people of ethnic African descent around the world during the mid-twentieth century (1930s-1970s) and how leaders of the Black movement in the U.S. and the Pan-African movement globally battled discrimination and prejudice.

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Verbatim Transcript (O.H. 1690)

LAWRENCE DE GRAAF CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: C. L. R. James [CJ]

INTERVIEWER: Joan V. Feeney [JF]

DATE: August 4, 1976

LOCATION: Washington, DC

PROJECT: African American Collection

TRANSCRIBERS: Amr Mohamed Riched and Nicholas Duy Nguyen

JF: This is an interview on August the 4th, 1976, with Mr. C. L. R. James in Washington, DC, conducted by Joan Feeney.

CJ: Now, strictly speaking, we have part one, which gives the Trotskyite movement¹ its, really, incapacity to handle the question, up to 1939, when I arrived from Great Britain. (pauses) Part two. Is it working? Part two (pauses) deals with the discussion with Trotsky² in 1939 and should be fairly comprehensive. (pauses) At the same time, I think I have said, that before we go to part two in 1939, you give a br – introductory sketch about my previous work in the Trotskyite movement. And the important thing about that is to refer to the fact that I have written both "The Black Jacobins,"³ a story of a Black revolt, and number two, before I had come to

¹ Movement supporting Leon Trotsky's interpretation of Marxism.

² Leon Trotsky (1879-1940); Russian revolutionary; opponent of Joseph Stalin.

³ *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*; 1938 book.

the United States, I had written the “History of Negro Revolt.”⁴ So, I was fairly well set when I came here. Now, I came in 1939, and an important part of your discussion, of what you’re doing, is what happened in 1939 when I went down with some of us, and we held an interview with Trotsky.

JF: Why did you come in 1938? There’s a question in my mind why you came –

CJ: – the question is that Cannon⁵ ‘ad⁶ told me he had come to Britain, and he said that the – it – Trotsky’s international movement had been functioning here as an international movement for years, but they had never had anybody to come from Europe or Asia or elsewhere to go around the United States and be a living embodiment of international Trotskyism. He’d thought he asked me if I would come, and I said that I would. I was glad to see the United States and to know something about the movement. So I came and it’s important – that, to have a clear view of what happened at the discussions in 1939 in Coyoacan⁷ with Trotsky. And when we came back, in theory, we all agreed. And this is important: the movement split in 1941 between the Cannonites⁸ and the Shachtmanites⁹ who called themselves the Workers Party.¹⁰ I went with the Workers Party. (coughs) But in reality, I wasn’t satisfied with the Workers Party and kept on fighting with them on all sorts of issues, which me and you needn’t go into, until 1947. And in 1947, the International Center in Paris¹¹ sent someone here to work out (pauses) a unity of the two groups. (pauses) The two groups consisted of the Cannonite party and the Shachtmanite party. And I was looked upon as no member, as nobody else, but a member of the Shachtmanite party, although everybody knew that these disputes used to go on between us. However, this – the man from (inaudible) from – from Paris proposed unity of the various parties. (pauses) Cannon said he was for unity. Shachtman then began to find a lot of reasons why he was not for unity. And I said I’m for unity. So it was on the question of unity that I went back to the, uh, to the Socialist Workers Party¹² because the party on the whole said, “You three in – in the United States should join together, you shouldn’t carry on these disputes,” and Shachtman refused to go. Now, that was in 1947. Then in 1948 (pauses) comes a very important passage. Ca – Cannon said, “We shall deal with the Black question,” which we have more or less accepted in

⁴ A *History of Negro Revolt*; 1938 book.

⁵ James P. Cannon (1890-1974); American leader in the Trotskyite movement.

⁶ Read: “had.”

⁷ Municipality (near Mexico City, Mexico); Leon Trotsky’s residence 1937-1940.

⁸ Trotskyite faction; named after James P. Cannon (see above, note 5).

⁹ Marxist faction; named after American Marxist Max Shachtman (1904-1972).

¹⁰ Founded 1940.

¹¹ Fourth International; Trotskyite organization; founded 1938.

¹² A communist party in the U.S.; founded 1938.

the doctrines that took part in the discussion in 1939 in Coyoacan, but we have done nothing since then, and in 1948 they – there was introduced into the Cannonite convention a resolution on the Negro question. Most of which I wrote and submitted it to the committee. And on the day of the convention, I introduced that movement with a speech, and both of those have been republished by Stokely Carmichael.¹³ (pauses) But, in any case, the Cannonites have reproduced them, I think in 1967. (pauses) And there you find elaborated to the full (pauses) my position on the Black question, the clear outline of which had been stated in 1939 in Mexico but which are only now fully developed in the Trotskyite movement in 1948. So, the two periods that you have to be concerned about are 1939 and 1948. Now, I left the Trotskyite movement in 1951. (pauses)

JF: Why?

CJ: Because I was dissatisfied (coughs) with them on the whole. (pauses) But still, let us stick to the question. Now it depends on, uh, how far you are proposed to go, I don't know. The position was clarified and remains clear from in 1948 and remains clear up to today. Now, how far you want to go with this I don't know. (pauses)

JF: Well, I am more interested in, actually, what you did after 1951 as it pertained to the Black movement in America.

CJ: Well, in 1951, (pauses) I, with – I was – formed – formed a movement. It was called the Johnson-Forest Movement.¹⁴

JF: Um-hm.

CJ: And we did some work (pauses), and we published a journal called – it was called, uh, (pauses) “Facing Reality.” We published a paper, called “Facing Reality.” And in that – in that pamphlet, you will find a development on the Black question, because in that pamphlet we dealt with everything, and you will find what we did on the Black question in that. And – and I don't know that there is much more that you can find.

[00:10:01]

JF: Well. What is the journal that's called “Speak Out?”

CJ: Now – “Speak” – those of us who were part of the Johnson-Forest (coughs) we split, split up into various groups because these groups are always splitting. That's why I will have nothing more to do with any of them. But some of us remained together and began to publish a journal called “Speak Out.” And in this journal, you will find some essays (coughs) on – and the death of Nkrumah,¹⁵ (pauses) and I don't know – there may be something

¹³ (1941-1998); Trinidadian Civil Rights activist.

¹⁴ Trotskyite movement; founded 1945 by C. L. R. James (using the pseudonym “J. R. Johnson”), and Russian American activist Raya Dunayevskaya (1910-1987; using the pseudonym “Freddie Forest”), and others; dissolved in 1962.

¹⁵ Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972); first president of Ghana (1960-1966); pan-Africanist.

else on the Black question. But what is important to remember is, may I add just this, in 1941, I went down to southeast Missouri to have a look at the Black question in its absolute rawness. And there I was – (inaudible) – be – became the organizer and was involved in a movement which turned out into a big strike,¹⁶ but had about 5000 people, shook up southeast Missouri tremendously, and I had to come back to get out of trouble there. So that’s southeast Missouri’s story. It’s worthwhile paying attention to, particularly because of the pamphlet which we published.

JF: That was “Starvation Wages?”¹⁷

CJ: Yes. That—that is a pamphlet we published in full. Because that tells the story of our attitude to the – to the Blacks – um. (pauses) What is important about that 1941 struggle is this: we went around from place to place in Missouri, getting Blacks and Whites to agree to join on the particular day when the strike would begin, and what’s happened was, when the time came near, three or four of the leaders and I sat down together to prepare this pamphlet. Now, the pamphlet is worth careful reading. So, they said, “Well, Brother Williams,” that’s what I used to call myself—I would call myself all sorts of names.

JF: What did you call yourself then?

CJ: “Brother Williams,” any—any name. I said, “Bro-,” they said, “Brother Williams, what about the pamphlet?” I told them, “What about the pamphlet?” They said, “What are you going to put in it?” I said, “I am not going to put anything in it. The pamphlet is a pamphlet about what you all have done, and why, and what you intend to do.” They said, “Well, we have never written any pamphlet before.” I said, “Well, you are going to write one now.” So—there were five or six of them around—I said, “What have you got to say? What do you think is important?” And he told me, and I wrote it down. “And you,” I said, “what next?” And he said, “Well, I think we shouldn’t leave out that,” so in the end that pamphlet consists of six or eight (coughs) passages which are the direct statements of Miss—Missouri sharecroppers, which I put together and polished up. It has become a—quite a famous pamphlet, but people don’t understand: it was a pamphlet that came from them. “Well,” I said, “well, what you have to say?” And he said his piece, and the other one added something, and –

JF: You just put it together.

CJ: –I—I—I just copied it down, and then put them together. Put stops and full stops and so on, and that was the pamphlet. I didn’t write the pamphlet. I had nothing ded – def – de – def – definite to say in that pamphlet so that

¹⁶ There had already been a “Sharecroppers Roadside Demonstration” in Missouri in early 1939, so there was a certain tradition of protest there.

¹⁷ “Down with Starvation Wages;” 1941 pamphlet.

- is dif—that is part of the Black question. Though I don't know what you would want to say else.
- JF: Well, you mentioned that, uh, you got in trouble over that. How did you get in trouble over that?
- CJ: I was—
- JF: I know very little of your career there in southeast Missouri other than the pamphlet itself.
- CJ: Now, you have to get a—there's a—there are copies to be had of the, uh, "The Militant,"¹⁸ the paper of this—of the Workers Party, (pauses) and in it there are steady accounts of all that we did down there. And you will find everything is there because as it happened I wrote it and sent it to the paper
- JF: And you were still calling yourself "Brother Williams?"
- CJ: No I called, I'd—some other name, I don't know—but it was very clear. I was writing it, and I was in charge. And you, you—there—there, and in the pamphlet, you will find everything else. And after that there is a statement you will find in "Facing Reality," but I don't think there is much else. Then what I will suggest is that you start—you—the final part of the pamphlet is what happened when Malcolm X¹⁹ begins his agitation because the Trotskyite movement, particularly led by a man who you ought to know his name, he came from Newark. His name begins with a B. (pauses) He took up Malcolm X, and he published the writings of Malcolm X and the Trotskyite movement—
- JF: Breitman?²⁰ Are You talking of Breitman?
- CJ: Breitman! Yes. Breitman. Now, Breitman and I worked very close together in the Trotskyite movement. And Breitman always insisted that James²¹ was erratic on this and that and other point. But he understood the Black question properly. So that there—they remained uncertain of what they were doing. And when Malcolm X emerged with a genuine Black movement, Breitman published what Malcolm X had to say, and once more the Trotskyite movement began to publish the—that material which they had published in '39, and which they had published as party documents in '48. They published a genuinely new pamphlet which they called, um, "The Troskyines;" they published everything—so that is all. Because I—when I left in 1953, and then I was—I had nothing to say. So your last chapter would be, I would suggest, how Malcolm X and Martin Luther King²² and

¹⁸ Subtitled "A Socialist Newsweekly Published in the Interest of Working People;" founded 1928.

¹⁹ (1925-1965); African American Muslim minister and Civil Rights activist.

²⁰ (1916-1986); Amercian communist activist; co-founder member of the Socialist Workers Party (1938); editor of *The Militant*.

²¹ C. L. R. James regularly refers to himself in the third person.

²² (1929-1968); African American Christian minister and Civil Rights activist.

- the rest of them began to do what I had insisted that should be the policy of the Trotsky's position. That the Blacks—Breitman—and then when they saw that, they were prepared because I had educated them to that degree. And Breitman in particular made a very close association with Malcolm X.
- JF: Now right here is where I start having questions, because I asked Breitman specifically, when did he first meet Malcolm X. He said he had never met him.
- CJ: I dare say. But nevertheless he published a—a list of, uh—
- JF: I realize that he published a list of Malcolm X's (speaking over each other) speeches.²³
- CJ: —speeches. Well, in fact, well, he never met him, so he never met him. What would that matter? The point is he understood his significance, and he—
- JF: How did he get his speeches?
- CJ: I don't know. But I don't think that is very important. I never heard that Malcolm X complained that what Breitman had printed as his speeches were not what he had said. So, somehow or other, Breitman had got hold of the speeches, and he printed them, and he associated them with the Trotskyite movement although he made it clear that Malcolm X—and Malcolm X himself made it clear—that he was never a Trotskyite. But the Trotskyites was one White movement that Malcolm X was prepared to work with, right from early. And (inaudible)—
- JF: (talking over each other) —that he left the Nation of Islam.²⁴
- CJ: —and could feel at home with.

[00:19:58]

- JF: However, Breitman did say the day that I interviewed him, that he had shown your work on the Negro question—he had shown it to Malcolm X's brother²⁵ who was a preacher in Detroit. And that the brother had shown it to Malcolm X. (pauses) But, why—
- CJ: What had Malcolm X said?
- JF: Well, he said he had never met Malcolm X. But that Malcolm X had approved of what you had written.
- CJ: But more than that: Stokely Carmichael after, uh, after being very, um, militant and, um-um-um, working in a widespread manner on the Black question, a year ago, came and asked me permission to publish those two—the speech and the resolution. And I told him, "Yes." And he has published them and is selling them in thousands of copies. Although they were done in 1948, he published them in 1974, I believe. And says in them that—that

²³ *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*; 1965 anthology edited by George Breitman.

²⁴ African American political and alternative religious movement; founded 1930 by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad (ca. 1877-ca. 1934).

²⁵ Reginald Richard Little (1927-2001); Malcolm X's younger brother.

- James, um, is not a Black question—that, that James—he is not a socialist, but James’s position on the Black question is something worthy of discussion. So Stokely has taken that up and is publishing it widely, and I see some of his people every now and then, we come and talk. (pauses) So, um, you will know this—you will—you will be rather—I mean, not in too much detail, as to what happened after ’51, but the two passages that matter are ’38, ’39, the discussion with Trotsky, and then when I took the question up again in ’48.
- JF: Alright. You’re out of the country – after 1952.
- CJ: ’52 (inaudible) – yes.
- JF: And you don’t come back until 1967.
- CJ: No, I come back in ’60. And I co—come—they—they allow me back in ’60.
- JF: Oh, they do?
- CJ: Yes. I come for a period. And I come back to teach about ’67. But when I come back to teach I don’t publish very much on the Bla—
- JF: But where are you in this country in 1960? (pauses)
- CJ: Going around. Seeing about the publication of my book. Ah—word ab—about “The Black Jacobins,” the republication. And meeting my friends and learning what I can. But I don’t take any practical part in politics. I talked to a lot of—
- JF: Did you meet Malcolm X at that time?
- CJ: No, I didn’t—I didn’t meet anybody. I was very careful. Because I was here on a visa. And at any time the American government can say, “Well, James, you ought to go home,” and refuse to give me a visa again. So, I have had visas ev—ever since, because I am very careful, but I say what I please. Although I don’t join anybody.
- JF: Alright. What, in your opinion, made Malcolm X leave the Nation of Islam? (pauses)
- CJ: Now, that is a question which I—Is the tape going?
- JF: The tape is going. Do you want it stopped?
- CJ: No, not at all! That is a question I can answer only with extreme caution. I was never a member of the Nation of Israel.²⁶ I never met Malcolm X, although I have read his autobiography.²⁷ And I find that one of the most remarkable books in the United States published after World War II. And not only I, but the book is still selling, I think, thousands of copies every month. And Black people do not buy thousands of copies of books every month. And so on. I was immensely impressed with him, and although he (inaudible)—uh, I (pauses), I rarely got hold of him after the autobiography was published. By that time he had been shot. But I didn’t think very much of the fact that he had been shot, or he had left. I was immensely struck by

²⁶ James says “Nation of Israel” but means “Nation of Islam.”

²⁷ *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; 1965 book by Alex Haley.

- the range and power of his politics be—even while he was a member of the—of Elijah Mohammed’s²⁸ movement. Malcolm was still—was a very powerful man. And if you ask me, why he left them, I can only give you my opinion. He was too powerful and was seeing too clearly into the realities of modern politics to stay with those people. But that is not an answer that is of any value to you. It’s just what I think. Because I never met him.
- JF: Yet your friend Nkrumah met him.
- CJ: He met Nkrumah and met a lot of them around. But I never talked with Nkrumah about Malcolm X, but all of those who met him, and Breitman and all, realized—and they read his writing and heard his speeches—that here was a man of an exceptional power and a dynamic leader of the Black people. And, uh, I—if I—I do not mistake myself, (inaudible) this (pauses)—Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and (inaudible) Brown,²⁹ and the rest of them—are the people I was talking about in 1939 and 1948 when I was saying: They don’t need to depend on the Marxist movement. They don’t need to depend on the trade union movement. They haven’t to follow the working-class movement. They have enough dynamic and powerful leaders and sufficient hostility to what the system is doing to them to do something, and that is what took place in the ’60s. Beginning with (inaudible) Mo—Mo—Mohammed, uh-uh-uh, Martin Luther King—what was the place? (pauses)
- JF: Martin Luther King where?
- CJ: Down in, uh—
- JF: Atlanta.
- CJ: —Atlanta. No, wait. Where was it? Where, where does—where?
- JF: Montgomery, Alabama.³⁰
- CJ: Montgomery, Alabama! That the movement began there.
- JF: Well, again, you have some action though by the Socialist Workers Party down there in Montgomery.
- CJ: Yeah, but—that does not matter—matter very much. What matters is the Black people picked up themselves. Started to organize. And hit the American people with one of the most powerful movements it has ever been struck by. And that is what I was talking about in 1939 and in 1948. (pauses) So, if you want to do a study, that is—you have to make up your mind about the various chapters and sections. And I’ll bring them to you.
- JF: Um-hm.
- CJ: So, I will repeat here just for the sake of chap—the opening chapter, the American situation, the Black situation from, say, about 1896—

²⁸ (1897-1975); African American leader of the Nation of Islam (1934-1975).

²⁹ Possibly Roosevelt Brown/Pauulu Kamarakafego (1932-2007); Bermudan Civil Rights activist.

³⁰ Montgomery bus boycott (1955-1956); Civil Rights event.

JF: You wrote something rather interesting. I can't quite recall the name of it. It was written around 1963, possibly 1962. And, it was a fairly large pamphlet. And in it, you were mentioning, you were interested in the beginning of this Black movement that was taking place in the 1960s. The Black liberation movement. And you were mentioning about a leader for the movement. And that the leader should become known internationally. You don't name who the leader is.

CJ: I have no—I don't remember the pamphlet. What is the name of it?

JF: Well, I would have to look at my bibliography but, um, (adjusts microphone) you definitely make mention of, uh, the American movement and the interest that you have in following the American movement. I don't really know who you are writing this to, this pamphlet—

[00:30:02]

CJ: I was in close touch with the "Facing Reality" group for many years.

JF: Um-hm.

CJ: We continued, until a few years ago we decided—they decided to break up. But they still publish my work. And (inaudible) things are being (inaudible)—

JF: Well, I just wondered if at that time, you know, you were aware in a certain way—that you might be aware of Malcolm X. And, uh, interested in Malcolm X

CJ: Oh, I would not have been merely aware. I would have told them to pay concentrated attention on Malcolm X. But not to be aware too particularly of what were his deviations from Marxism, but here was obviously a Black leader who would be able to take the Black people around places. I wouldn't be surprised—it would be very strange if I hadn't said that.

JF: Uh, well, you did not mention him by name but it seemed to me—

CJ: —I know—I may, uh, I may—I may have mentioned him—I may have mentioned him but with the caution that would come from me particularly as I hadn't met him personally.

JF: It seemed—it just seemed a strange coincidence that, uh, your words would fit this emerging Black leader, and then shortly after that, within the next year, this man did decide—Malcolm X—to go and, uh, meet various international leaders.

CJ: And also to state clearly that while he didn't want Black—White people in a Black movement, he was ready to collaborate with them on any issues on which they both agreed. Malcolm X wrote that. (pauses)

JF: Well, I cannot find what I'm thinking of right now, but it was a fairly large work of yours. It was not, you know, a small, ten-page pamphlet. And, uh, it was written in the early 1960s.

- CJ: Was it called “The Negroes Take the Lead?”³¹
- JF: Might have been. (pauses)
- CJ: Because I was in England when the Black movement started here. And I wrote that pamphlet. I was the chief person writing that pamphlet because the others made me. To “The Negro” –I said (inaudible)–I said, in this struggle that is taking place, the United States is picking up itself. Black people are once more taking the lead.
- JF: Um-hm.
- CJ: Because the movement that broke out later came—started with Montgomery, Alabama. And I pointed that out in a pamphlet, named “The Negroes Take the Lead.” That is—that—but that was written away, from away. From talking with (inaudible). So, I don’t take—the two things that matter are, number one, (pauses)—we are (pauses)—you are concerned with my concern with the Black question and with the Pan-African question.
- JF: Right.
- CJ: You want to know about the Pan-African question?³²
- JF: Yes.
- CJ: Well, I joined a pan—pardon—I, in—dunno³³—in Britain, I found an organization—by the way, you will find in a pamphlet called, (pauses) “The History of Pan-African Revolt.”³⁴ There, I review the question. You will find what I thought about the question up to 1938, when I left the United States. And then I reviewed the question from 1938 to 1969. The last chapter gives my view of the Black question from 1938 to 1969: “The Pan-African Struggle.” And then in “Speak Out,” and in “The Black World,” I have two essays on Nkrumah.
- JF: Right.
- CJ: And that—that would about cover everything, I think.
- JF: Uh. Okay. (pauses)
- CJ: What I’ve been after is that you get things—in d—in—in—in a certain disciplined order.
- JF: Uh. Right. Did you ever meet Du Bois?³⁵
- CJ: Ah, yes, I met Du Bois. I came to America here in 1938, and I used to meet Du Bois. I would meet him at meetings or in, uh, private houses. There

³¹ “Negro Americans Take the Lead: A Statement of the Crisis in American Civilization,” 1964 pamphlet.

³² Global Movement in support of solidarity between Indigenous and diaspora ethnic Africans.

³³ Sounds like: “dunno” (don’t know).

³⁴ James’s 1938 book *A History of Negro Revolt* was republished 1969 as *The History of Pan-African Revolt*.

³⁵ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963); African American sociologist and Civil Rights activist.

- was—there would—a lot of us would be meeting, having a discussion. Now, you know friendliness and so forth. In Washington, DC, I met him, but there was no particularly close association. I met him again in—in—in Ghana. I was in Ghana in 1960, and Du Bois was in Ghana, and I heard him making speeches, and we met. But I—but there was no particularly close association. Although I learned a great deal of the Black struggle from his work on “Black Reconstruction,”³⁶ which is one of my standard works. That history book that he wrote. To me, that’s one of the finest examples of American history that you could think of. Not only Black history. But that—and in Du Bois’s work on the whole, there are many places, where you can see, he’s very familiar with the Black Jacobins.³⁷ (pauses)
- JF: I just want to check this. (pauses)—’cause, I think you should hold the microphone just a little bit closer. (adjusts microphone)
- CJ: (audibly louder) Yes, well, I think we have—
- JF: Um. Alright. (pauses) Did you—were you at all responsible for Du Bois attending the Fifth Pan-African Conference?³⁸
- CJ: No, George Padmore³⁹ was.
- JF: Uh-huh.
- CJ: Yes, but Pad—I was in America—uh, in England, uh—I was in America at the time.
- JF: Um-hm.
- CJ: But Padmore and I kept on working together—
- JF: Right.
- CJ: And I represented the movement here. And spoke about this here to many places. But I wasn’t responsible for Du Bois’s coming. That was Padmore’s work, although Padmore informed me of that, because Padmore was an extraordinary man who kept his close associates informed of everything of what he was doing.
- JF: Now what about Nkrumah? You met him here in this country—
- CJ: Yes.
- JF: —while he was a student.
- CJ: Yes, and I—when—when he was going to England, I wrote to Padmore to tell him that Nkrumah is coming.
- JF: Right.
- CJ: And Nkrumah is a very able man. And I also made a remark, and I don’t want it to be continued, I said, “He’s not very bright.” Which would seem to people quite stupid. Because Nkrumah was always a bright man. But

³⁶ *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*; 1935 book by W. E. B. Du Bois.

³⁷ Du Bois’s work on Reconstruction (1935) predates James’s book on the Black Jacobins (1938).

³⁸ International meeting; Manchester (United Kingdom); October 15-21, 1945.

³⁹ (1903-1959); Trinidadian journalist and political activist.

what I referred to was he—he used to talk about Marxism, surplus value, and the theories of Marx—and he used to talk a lot of nonsense. And that’s when I—I wrote to Padmore, and I told Padmore, “See to it that you can help,” and then Padmore helped to educate Nkrumah. And that—that—that was that communication. And periodically after that I would see Nkrumah. I went to Ghana, from Trinidad, and Nkrumah would come to the United States, and I would meet him here, or he would come to England, and I would meet him in England. And I don’t—that we kept up a steady communication all the time.

JF: But how did you meet him in the first place, though?

CJ: So, I met a girl, uh, who was a member—of the movement and who was always around there—some people who go around everywhere—went to a meeting at first Du Bois was speaking, and she saw this young African, and she said he looked bright and very revolutionary and went up to him and told him, (pauses) uh, “You know the work of C. L. R. James?” He said, “No, I’ve read his book, ‘The Black Jacobins’.” She says, “Would you like to meet him?” He said, “Yes.” He said—she said. “I will arrange it.” And she came and told me and brought Nkrumah to—to see me, and we became friends and close associates in the United States. And talked a lot about politics and activity in general. Oh, yes.

[00:40:16]

JF: Okay. Well, I already had more or less (pauses) that background. Um—I wanted to know a little bit about your friendship with Richard Wright.⁴⁰ Uh—

CJ: I have.

JF: —your friend, what the goal was.

CJ: I was very friendly with Richard Wright. And I have written (pauses) an essay somewhere on Richard Wright. But Wright and I became very friendly. He was a highly developed, literary person. And he broke with the Stalinists. That was no—that was no quarrel to me. But he and I—

JF: Did you influence him (talking over each other) in any way to break with them—

CJ: (talking over each other) No, not—not at all—not at all—not at all. But he knew that, and he and I continued to be friends. Undoubtedly, we talked about things, but his—he already had an orientation when we began to talk about it. And I didn’t—I didn’t influence him. By which I don’t mean to say that, without me, he would not have, uh, joined. But we talked a lot about it, and he told me a lot about them. (pauses)

⁴⁰ (1908-1960); African American author.

- JF: And what ever happened to the, um, why, you had a couple of literary endeavors that you were going to do. You and he together (CJ coughs loudly) were going to bring out a magazine at one time?
- CJ: He wanted to bring out a magazine.
- JF: No, wait! It was a book at first. It was a – an anthology type book.
- CJ: No. His wife – my wife⁴¹ got hold of some manuscripts by Richard Wright a while bef – before – before – before he left – and the book that became – what has, uh – what is the name of his second book? Not the first book, was –
- JF: Well –
- CJ: – what is the name of the second book?
- JF: By Richard Wright himself?
- CJ: Yes.
- JF: “Native Son,”⁴² is it not – that – that is his first.
- CJ: No – no – Native Son – is, he wrote “Black Voices”⁴³ –
- JF: “Black Voices.”
- CJ: – a series of essays. And then he wrote another book (pauses), uh, “Native Son.” After which he wrote an essay on his own life.⁴⁴ And he showed my – he – my wife that manuscript, and there were chapters in that book which did not appear in the book that was published by the American publisher, but which my wife published in an essay on him because he gave it to her. And then, later, she wrote another book about him.⁴⁵ But that would show you how close the association was. But, naturally, when he went abroad and I went abroad, we were away from the Black question. We could meet and talk in Paris, that was all.
- JF: Yet he did become very active, politically, when he went to Paris.
- CJ: He wasn’t so active politically. He would go to meetings.
- JF: Well he went to the Bandung Conference⁴⁶ and –
- CJ: But that was not being active politically. He went to the Bandung Conference to find out what was going on. As he took a trip to – to Ghana –
- JF: Well his works seem to take on a much more political tone such as “White Man Listen”⁴⁷ and “Black Power.”⁴⁸ (pauses)

⁴¹ Constance Webb (1918–2005); American model and author; James’s second wife (1946–1953).

⁴² *Native Son*; 1940 novel by Richard Wright.

⁴³ *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*; 1941 book by Richard Wright.

⁴⁴ *Black Boy*; 1945 memoir by Richard Wright.

⁴⁵ *Richard Wright: A Biography*; 1968 book by Constance Webb.

⁴⁶ International meeting; Bandung (Indonesia); April 18–24, 1955.

⁴⁷ *White Man, Listen!*; 1957 essay by Richard Wright.

⁴⁸ *Black Power*; 1954 book by Richard Wright.

- CJ: Yes, but that – that – that you could say, but he was not associated with any particular body of organization. (pauses) That's to say, he – when he went to the Bandung Conference, he wasn't a part of the conference.
- JF: No, that's right.
- CJ: And he went to Ghana, and they welcomed him there and took him around. But that was about all. He didn't get on very well with them. He didn't understand – he didn't understand what was going on in Ghana.
- JF: No, He admitted that in his book! (laughs)
- CJ: He had – he had no idea of what it was to be a member of an underdeveloped country. Wright didn't know that. He was – he had been educated in the advanced sections of the United States. And that was all.
- JF: We – I think we got away from the question originally. The question was not about something that Wright had written. That he gave your wife, Constance Webb.⁴⁹ The question was about something that was never written by you and other Black intellectuals at the time, that Wright wanted to get going. Now this was mentioned in your wife's book.
- CJ: We may have planned to do some work of the kind. If it's – if it's mentioned in my wife's book it is true because she had no need to put anything in that which was – but I suppose we split, and it was never done.
- JF: Um-hm. Well, I was just curious as to finding out exactly why it was never done.
- CJ: It was never done because we separated. He went to – to, uh – (pauses)
- JF: – to, well, he went to, uh, abroad.
- CJ: He went abroad, and I went abroad, and we never met. We both pursued our different paths of work, but I learned a great deal from – about Richard Wright.
- JF: Okay. Just real fast, can I ask you about some people that I think you were associated with? And you can say something about them or (laughs) say nothing about them. Okay, um – what about Martin Glaberman?⁵⁰ Who was he?
- CJ: He is – was a member of a – of the old Trotskyite organization that split away from Sha – Shachtman. He went with us. And he went back with us into the SWP,⁵¹ and became the center and organizer of material and meetings and groupings et cetera. Became an organizing center for the Trotsky – the – the – the Johnson-Forest organization.
- JF: Okay.
- CJ: That is – and is still to this day – is a person who can – is a person who must be approached for any work of that kind.
- JF: And where is he now? Is he still in Detroit?

⁴⁹ See above, note 41.

⁵⁰ (1918-2001); American Marxist author.

⁵¹ Socialist Workers Party; see above, note 12.

- CJ: He's still in Detroit.
- JF: And what is the name of his organization now? It was "Facing Reality." But what is the name of it now?
- CJ: It has no orga – there is no name now.
- JF: (chuckles)
- CJ: Simply, he has all the material there, and we print the booklets we need. And it has no nation – no name, and he calls it "Facing Reality." That is all.
- JF: Okay. Uh, what about, uh, Grace Chin Lee?⁵²
- CJ: Grace Chin Lee was a girl who joined us, a Chinese girl, very well educated. She'd taken an – a degree in philosophy at Bryn Mawr, and she joined the Trotskyite movement. And very soon joined the Johnson-Forest element in the Workers Party, and became one of the most powerful workers in the party until we split.
- JF: And now she's married to James Boggs.⁵³
- CJ: James Boggs joined the party – afterwards. But we were already well established when she married James Boggs. And now they work together.
- JF: Right. They – they write as a team.
- CJ: Yeah, they write as a team. But James – James Lee, uh, Grace Lee was a person with two extraordinary qualities. One, she had a tremendous capacity for hard work. And number two, she was utterly devoted to the information, gathering materials and such things necessary for the progress of the ideas that we had. And nothing can ever take away from the work that we've done. And I was the center of it. There was, uh, a girl called (inaudible), there was also, uh, Grace Lee, and there was another young man called William Grovan,⁵⁴ and the four of us were the – the center of, although, – ultimately, we had about seventy people. But that fell apart when I left, they began to break about – but we were a powerful organization while we were there. There were about seventy of us, but at the center of it was myself, the guiding person, and so, there was Grace Lee who knew German and had the training in philosophy that she needed, and had all the works of Hegel and the other German philosophers, and, uh, we assumed that she knew Russian and translated everything that she would find on Stalin and Lenin and Trotsky and the Russian president, and William Gorman⁵⁵ who didn't do so much work but had a – and still has – a very fine intellect and worked with us on the problems that we put forward. And you can still find – of many people today – are still reprinting and rereading the writings that we wrote some twenty or thirty years ago. This is a fantastic witness. They are still relevant. Oh, yes.

⁵² Grace (Chin) Lee Boggs (1915-2015); (Chinese) American author and activist.

⁵³ (1919-1993); African American political activist.

⁵⁴ Unidentified.

⁵⁵ Unidentified.

[00:50:46]

- JF: Um-hm. What about Daniel Guérin?⁵⁶ I think that's how you pronounce his name.
- CJ: Daniel Guérin is a good friend of mine. A man who is—is working in France. He has written a superb book on the French Revolution,⁵⁷ and that was never translated. But he came to the United States, and he went all over the United States, and he wrote a study of the United States,⁵⁸ and in this book he wrote a chapter on the Black question.
- JF: Yeah!
- CJ: And the Trotsky's movement published it. And, to this day, it is the finest analysis of the Black question published before the Black movement broke out. Because in that book, Guérin wrote, as if it was certain to come, and there were people who sneered at him but afterwards he could say, "I told you." Oh, yes.
- JF: Um-hm. And he was not allowed back into the United States.
- CJ: At one time, but recently he was allowed in.
- JF: (pauses) Uh-huh. Okay. Alright. I think the only other thing that I did want to ask you—
- CJ: (whispering a question to JF)
- JF: Okay, uh, it has to do with—
- CJ: (adjusts microphone) Do you want this now? (adjusts microphone)
- JF: Just—five minutes more.
- CJ: I say, of this?
- JF: Yes.
- CJ: (inaudible)
- JF: Okay. (laughs) Alright.
- CJ: Alright. (laughs)
- JF: Uh, this has to do with, uh, LeRoi Jones Amiri Baraka.⁵⁹ (pauses) And, um (pauses), the second time you were in the United States. I guess it's really the third time you were in the United States.
- CJ: Yes. I knew nothing about LeRoi Jones. He had written some verse. But I had paid little attention to it. But when I came back the second time, I realized that he was interested in the Black question in a political manner that I hadn't noticed before. But he was associated with Karenga⁶⁰ in some sort of Black conception of what the world was like and Blacks, and I paid

⁵⁶ (1904-1988); French anarchist and author.

⁵⁷ James is probably referring to *La Lutte des classes pendant la Première République*; 1947. Daniel Guérin subsequently published, on the subject of the French Revolution, *Bourgeois et bras nus: La guerre sociale sous la Révolution (1793-1795)*; 1973; and *La Révolution française et nous*; 1976.

⁵⁸ *Où va le peuple américain?*; 1950-1951 book by Daniel Guérin.

⁵⁹ (1934-2014); African American author.

⁶⁰ Maulana Karenga (b. 1941); African American academic; creator of Kwanzaa.

- little attention to it. Then one day, he came up to me and told me. "I am—I am goi—at San Diego, my organization is going to (pauses) hold a conference." He had an organization. I don't remember what it wa—
- JF: The Congress of African People.⁶¹
- CJ: Yes, he has—"and I want you to open the conference." I told him, "But that is impossible. I will be in England. Oh, who is going to pay that money to come here? And then I—as soon as I cou—I couldn't stay there for a day or two, because I have other work to do after." He told me, "That's alright." And I went down to San Diego, spoke for a—for fifty minutes, introducing the conference, and then left and went my way, besid—bu—since which time, Im—Imaku—Imamu Baraka and I have been always very friendly. I—w—he invited me to come to his party meeting in—in—in New Jersey—New—Newark.
- JF: Newark?
- CJ: Yes. And I went there and spoke to his party, found them very much alive, very alert, and pretty well educated—that he had seen after. And I am con—I am—consider him one of the liveliest and brightest of the young men who are interested in the Black question. Recently he has made a big swing towards Marxism—I—I—I say that's fine. (pauses) Oh, yes—but, uh, he invited me to that San Diego meeting and never insisted that I should say this or that. Told me I could say what I please. And I gave a general view of the Black question. That's happened to be printed in "Muhammad's Speech."⁶² You will find that total speech in that. (pauses)
- JF: In "Mohammed's Speech?"
- CJ: In "Mohammed's Speech." They pri—printed the whole speech. I'm sure they got it from a tape. (pauses) The complete speech.
- JF: Um-hm.
- CJ: And while I have not joined any organization in the United States, I have been to all sorts of universities and groups of people to speak. I've been to Harvard. I've been to Yale. I've been to Princeton. I've been to Madison, Wisconsin. I've been to Chicago. I've been to, uh, Sacramento. I have been to, eh, uh—Irvine in, uh, California twice, I've been—I've been—I've been all over the place. They've asked me, and I've gone and spoken. And nobody has ever told me anything—
- JF: What have you usually spoken on?
- CJ: On the Black question or the European question or the American question. I don't call names, such as Nixon⁶³ and Mitchell,⁶⁴ but everybody knows

⁶¹ Black nationalist organization; active in the 1970s.

⁶² Probably *Muhammad Speaks*; newspaper of the Nation of Islam (1960-1975).

⁶³ Richard Nixon (1913-1994); U.S. President (1969-1974).

⁶⁴ John N. Mitchell (1913-1988); U.S. Attorney General (1969-1972).

- what I'm speaking about. Oh, I've spoken with utmost freedom, and nobody has ever intervened in me –
- JF: Are you still connected with any of the universities here?
- CJ: I am teaching at Federal City College.⁶⁵
- JF: What are you teaching?
- CJ: History. I was in the History and Philosophy Department. They have split those, and I am now teaching in the History Department alone. And at Howard, I am attached to the African Institute – or the Institute for African Study, you know they have. And I've been there for two or three years, and I give a class or two per week up there on the African question because I've studied closely and I've been around in Africa a bit you know?
- JF: Um-hm.
- CJ: So, I've been in – in those, and all sorts of organizations ask me to come and speak, and I go, but at the present time, I am more concerned with getting myself in order for my autobiography.⁶⁶ I've been thrown off that by the film⁶⁷ which was – which appeared in London about a few weeks ago – and was a great success, I am told. And then I was invited to Jamaica, a few weeks ago, for the CARIFTA⁶⁸ festival. So, between the film and – which took me to Trinidad and to England and back (inaudible) – and the CARIFTA festival, the autobiography has suffered somewhat. But I'm getting back to it now. I'm going to get into it very soon.
- JF: When do you, uh, hope to publish it?
- CJ: Oh, it ought to be finished by about October. (pauses). Yes. And then I'm going to take a long rest – five years.
- JF: (laughs) And not get involved in any movements.
- CJ: I have been – I have had enough – I have done a lot of work. And they keep coming, asking me, they keep coming, always coming. What about this? What do you think about that? Have you read that? Could you tell us about that? They keep – it's a constant stream – morning, noon, and night – they come. (background voices)
- JF: Well, the only other question I have concerns something called the International Black Power Conference held in Bermuda in 1969.⁶⁹ That – I realize you were in charge of a series of, I think, four different workshops.
- CJ: I've worked – that was done by a man called Roosevelt Brown.⁷⁰ A man from Bermuda, very militant, a very revolutionary Black – he asked me to

⁶⁵ (1968-1978); college in Washington, DC; subsequently absorbed into the University of the District of Columbia.

⁶⁶ Perhaps a reference to the new edition (1983) of James's 1963 memoir, *Beyond a Boundary*.

⁶⁷ *Beyond a Boundary*; 1976 film directed by Mike Dibb (BBC TV series Omnibus).

⁶⁸ Caribbean Free Trade Association (1965-1972).

⁶⁹ First Regional International Black Power Conference; Bermuda; July 10-13, 1969.

⁷⁰ See above, note 29.

- come, and I went and took part in the workshops and told him what I thought, that I had a lot of experience. Both in the Carribean, in England, and in the United States, and I was pretty useful. But once he had another one, and I went back, and they wouldn't let me land.
- JF: Well, I understand that—that 1969 one—that very few of the American Blacks were able to get into the conference.
- CJ: No, but they were not—but some of them got there but, in any case, they went (inaudible).
- JF: So, there couldn't have been too many of them at your particular workshops.
- CJ: No, but there were a few of them.
- JF: There must have been, because a number of the things that were discussed at those workshops (CJ coughs) seems to have been put into practice the following year in the Black movement here.

[01:00:06]

- CJ: Yes. Where have you got the account of the workshop?
- JF: I have a xerox copy of it. I think I got it from the university in Washington. They were the ones with the, uh, account. And it, uh, contained the 1968 Third Black Power Conference in Philadelphia, the proceedings of that, as well as the 1969 Bermuda International Conference.
- CJ: Could you please make a note of that for me?
- JF: Sure!
- CJ: Just put it there. 19—
- JF: I—I would like to get a hold of the one that took place in 1967 in, uh, New Jersey. I haven't been able to—
- CJ: I know nothing about that.
- JF: Okay. (pauses) Alright. I think you're gonna have to get ready for your other appointment.
- CJ: No, that's alright. I won't be going—
- JF: That's alright?
- CJ: Yes
- JF: Okay. Let me just stop this for a moment. Alright. Thank you very much, Mr. James, for the interview.

[01:01:19]

END OF INTERVIEW